

ART LIFE PROFILE

AN INTERVIEW WITH SHARON SHAPIRO

albemarle recently had the pleasure of talking with contemporary artist Sharon Shapiro, who lives and works in Charlottesville, Virginia.

For years, she has been fascinated by images of women found in the media and the impact such images have on what it means for a woman to be sexual and at the same time powerful. Shapiro's work reflects the realization that issues regarding the body are seldom just body issues. As in the old cliché, the body has a head, and what comes into our heads determines how we experience our bodies more than any immediate physical promptings.

"My ongoing interest in the figure stems from my intention to address issues of the human condition, particularly that of the female: sexuality, the physical body, fertility, and an awareness of mortality," Shapiro states. "I paint girls and women in an attempt to decode femininity, desire, and the push-pull between control and compliance. I work from found photos, ads from the 50s and 60s, and images of my daughter and myself in order to raise the question: Has our vulnerability to outside forces such as fashion culture, media presentations, our peers, and our mothers decreased or increased over time?"

But just like most paintings that deal with psychological figuration, it's not always what we see with the naked eye that gives the art its full meaning. And the beauty of this work is that it can mean so much more to the viewer, beyond even her natural and fully realized desires. Therefore, it becomes dangerous to categorize this work as a distinct style. In Shapiro's own words, she describes her process, her inspirations, and what Charlottesville means to her.

Could you describe your style, technique, and method to creating your art?

I am fascinated by the conflict between inner and outer experience—the need to stay composed while one's interior is churning. Painting is a good vessel for this tension. While there is a decorative aspect to my work, influenced, in part, by childhood memories of color and pattern, there is also isolation, fragility, and yearning.

Conversation has always intrigued me: the editing, the questions, the details remembered. Coded and overt signs of communication exist in my work. I draw upon my internal desires and society's generic depictions of women to create images of individuality.

My style is figurative, painterly, colorful, realistic but not exact, somewhat bold, sometimes aggressive through the paint, sometimes restrained. There are a lot of abstract passages in my paintings even

though they are dealing with the human face and figure. My technique is for the most part paint (acrylic) on canvas, and frequently drawings on paper out of charcoal, graphite, and/or pastels. I also like watercolor. And collage. My method is to look a lot . . . at faces, from life and from photographs, to find images that inspire me or provoke me, or to create those images from taking the photos myself of a pseudo narrative that I set up. Then I draw the image out on canvas, and it usually changes a lot from what I had originally intended the painting to be. This is a good thing, I think, because you end up growing every time you work on a piece. You become the person in the painting, or the painting changes you and your perception of things anyway.

Who and what are your inspirations in creating your pieces?

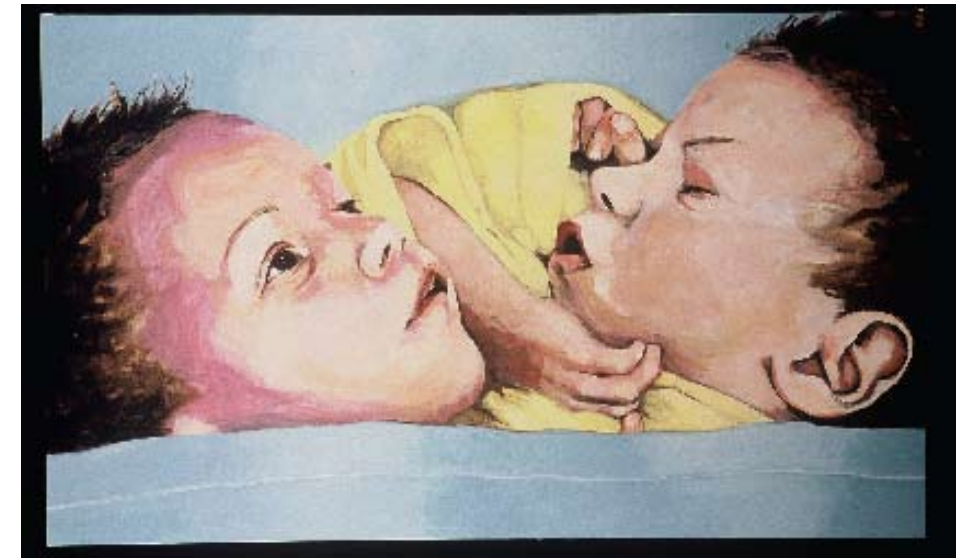
I collect a lot of photos and magazines. *Life*, *Playboy*, other random magazines, mostly from the 1960s and 70s, and I also take a lot of photos of my daughter, friends, myself. I take information from pretty much anywhere. If you wait to be inspired, it might be a long wait. I'm too impatient for that, so I find that working creates inspiration. Or, as Chuck Close said, "more often than not work is salvation."

I can say that I look for images that are one way upon first glance, and then another thing completely upon longer

inspection. For instance, I like the tension between the calm surface of something (someone) and the material underneath that may be quite intense or vulnerable.

Can you describe some of your phases and what you are currently working on?

I have been through some phases, that's for sure. I will do something until I feel I have nothing new to say about it, or nothing new to add to the mystery of an idea, so then I gradually move on to the next series or body of work. My first real body of work were these large charcoal drawings of children from old Victorian tintypes; then I did sort of these half women/half child "split" canvases (literally 2 canvases in many cases); I did a series of women in landscapes, some of them in formal clothes; I painted my daughter a lot (and still do), and then about three years ago, I started working larger (5' canvases) and began painting monumental (as Leah Stoddard, director of 2nd Street Gallery, likes to call them) women from old photos that I found. After that, I did a series of women on the phone, and now I'm going back to imagery of children and babies. It just seems to be what I'm most interested in looking at right now. The latest painting I did is of twins, but they are co-joined, although not most people can tell that when they see it. They think it is just this really large, warm, and beautiful image of babies. But it's from a grainy black and white photo from a 1950's *Life* Magazine from an article about Siamese twins (as they were then called) and separation surgery. These particular twins didn't survive that surgery, but I only know that because I Googled them and found it online. In the article there is great hope that they would make it. I have just loved the image for a long time, the yin-yang quality, it's such a metaphor for so many things.



Hinged, 2006, 60" x 36"
acrylic on canvas

Is Charlottesville part of your inspiration or method, and if so, how?

Yes, absolutely. It's part of my inspiration because I'm here more than any other place, and every person I know here and have a relationship with has to do with who I am as a person; they affect me, and that, in turn, affects my art. I also walk and run outside often, and the colors affect me, the light, and the landscape in some way. It's a lot like Bluefield, WV, where I grew up, surrounded by mountains, but much more cultural.

What keeps you in Charlottesville?

My sense that it is home, that it's where I am most comfortable at least for now. I think it's a pretty great place to live, work as an artist, and raise a daughter as a single parent.

What has been the reaction to your artwork in Charlottesville?

For the most part, it's been great. I have met so many wonderful people through my art. Many of my good friends are people that I met because they were initially drawn to my paintings and purchased one or commissioned a portrait. In doing so, we got to know each other and are now friends. There was one unfortunate review in *The Daily Progress* about my show at Second Street in which the reviewer called my work "trashy" and compared it to pornography—which is ridiculous at best. I wrote a letter to the editor in response, and they printed it, so I feel we live in a very open-minded community for the most part.

How do you feel about the art market in Charlottesville, and what is your outlook on the future for our area?



Badlands, 2006, 48" x 60"
acrylic on canvas

I think it's getting better all the time. It has come a long way in the last ten years that I've lived here. It's pretty impressive how much it's grown in terms of the number of galleries, and the actual gallery spaces have greatly improved. There are many more artists living here now, and there is just more going on than ever before.

What contribution and/or legacy would you like to give to our area through your art, if any?

I would say that, more than anything, I would like for my work to continue to ask questions that are relevant and timely, no matter what subject or approach I choose. As Francis Bacon said, "The job of the artist is always to deepen the mystery." *a*



Sharon Shapiro has exhibited around the country and is in the collections of various collectors and institutions, including the Museum of Contemporary Art in Atlanta, GA. She is also available for commissions. If you would like more information and to see more of her incredible work, visit her website at www.sharonshapiro.com.

Photo © Billy Hunt



Mount, 2006, 48" x 60"
acrylic on canvas